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THE LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHER<sup>1</sup>

By ALBERT W. ARON

I TAKE it for granted that the modern language teacher has as good a practical command of the language he is teaching as he has been able to secure, that he is at home in its literature, and that he knows the life and institutions from which this literature has sprung. In addition to this, I believe he should have a general linguistic background, by which I mean a fundamental understanding of the principles of language in general and their application to the particular language which is being taught. In this paper I shall use the term *linguistics* in that sense.

What phases of linguistics are to be stressed? What is their practical value for the modern language teacher? Of what teachers may such a background reasonably be expected? The answers to these questions must of necessity be merely suggestive.

The essential branches of linguistics with which the teacher is ordinarily not on terms of easy familiarity are phonetics, principles and history of language, and psychology. These are, to be sure, merely various phases of the same phenomenon, human speech, but will be treated separately for practical reasons.

So much has been said and written on the subject of phonetics, and so general is the, at least theoretical, acceptance of the view that a modern language teacher must be phonetically equipped, that further comment may seem superfluous. But it may not be amiss to restate what has always seemed to me one of the most telling practical arguments in favor of phonetic training and the resultant teaching of a good pronunciation, an argument usually not considered as it should be. This is the immense saving of time that is effected. It has been said that it really matters little whether the great mass of students acquire an approximately correct pronunciation or not, but that the rub comes when all the students attempt to make themselves intelligible in the

<sup>1</sup> Based on a paper read at the meeting of the Association of Modern Language Teachers of the Central West and South at Chicago, May 13, 1922. The topic was suggested to me by Prof. C. E. Young, acting president of the Association.

varying dialects that have sprung up in one class room. Whatever our attitude toward the more or less exclusive use of the foreign tongue in our class work, few of us, I believe, are willing to accept old Dr. Arnold's dictum that French be taught as a dead language.

We will then use a certain amount of the foreign idiom in class, either in question and answer or in reading aloud or in oral reproduction or the like. It has been my experience in observation extending over a number of years in which I used alternately pure imitation and a method in which I employed phonetic aids that the amount of time consumed in correcting flagrant mispronunciations in the case of the purely imitative method was three or four times as great as in the other. The worst loss is, of course, not the time, though that is bad enough, but the break in the continuity of interest in reading, discussion, or whatever may be going on. So much for the economy of time.

Another point rarely considered is that the good or best students, this most neglected part of our student body, are entitled to get more than the mere approximation expected of the low average. The leaders have been so generally neglected for the sake of the herd that at least some of our educators are waking up to the urgent necessity of "salvaging the creators." In the matter of pronunciation, these best students can and will get the good pronunciation which they have a right to expect only by phonetic aid. (I should like to remark parenthetically that I believe only in phonetic aids, but by no means in attempting to teach the pupil technical phonetics. Time expended in this manner is so much love's labour lost. Any teacher who can remember his first introduction to the scientific study of phonetics will testify to the difficulty of the first approach to this subject.)

It goes without saying that real scientific study of language is impossible without a knowledge of phonetics. Before passing to a consideration of this phase, I should like to mention in passing one of a thousand examples that might be given where a knowledge of phonetics has given an opportunity to arouse that elusive but essential quality, interest. A number of my students had remarked on the fact that English-German cognates apparently contained the equation German *ei*=English *o*: *Stein*, stone, *Bein*, bone, *ein*, one, etc. When the interesting parallel was suggested to them

between the development of *ai* via *a:* and *ɔ:* to *o:* and the negro English development of *ai* (personal pronoun) to *a:*, namely that in both cases the first component of the diphthong *ai* had been lengthened and the second dropped, this peep into the life of human speech invested their language study with new life and dignity. It is self-evident that explanations of this sort are suggestive rather than exhaustive and that they come as an answer to a question, either expressed or implied.

As a knowledge of the sounds and sound production of a language is essential, so also an understanding of the general principles of language and of the history of language is equally important for the teacher who aspires to the dignity and privilege of membership in that great profession, teaching. As long as the teacher depends on a pedagogical bag of tricks and not on skill in teaching based on a thorough knowledge of and about the material he is teaching, namely language, just so long language teaching cannot claim classification as a profession. This thesis may, however, be branded as theoretical and rhetorical rather than practical. The real decisive question is: with what preparation will our teachers attain the best results? I intend to suggest briefly the results of the wider linguistic knowledge which I am championing; it changes that attitude of the teacher toward his subject; it vivifies the instruction by increasing the interest of the student; it causes the student to think where before only distasteful memory work seemed to count; and lastly, the question of discipline becomes a negligible quantity on account of the quickened interest.

No language teacher is unacquainted with the almost personal, dull resentment that pupils will from time to time exhibit at the presumption of foreign languages in indulging in idomatic vagaries quite foreign to the mother tongue or in bristling with irregularities where a regular inflection would so much better facilitate the entrance into the land of knowledge. How can the linguistically untrained teacher, to whom also these apparent irregularities seem like chaos, feel other than confused, ill at ease, helpless? Nothing will a class sense as quickly as such a state of mind on the part of the teacher. The result is the feeling that the resentment against the foreign language is justified, that of all the subjects the pupil is studying, language is the one where purely arbitrary

rules reign supreme. Contrast with this situation the teacher who sees in the idiom not an idiotic peculiarity but a characteristic development caused by definite psychological, historical, cultural, or other reasons. Likewise in phonological and morphological irregularities, he sees the living interplay of various forces, all of them operating according to some law intelligible to the teacher initiated in the wonders of language. Whatever may be his attitude toward answering any question that may arise or his method of doing so, the difference between his state of mind and that of the untrained teacher and the resulting effect on the class is apparent.

In that excellent book on language teaching, Palmer's *Principles of Language Study*, six main factors are enumerated which make for interest. The first of these is the elimination of bewilderment. The pertinence of this to the point we are discussing is manifest. I do not wish to be misunderstood as advocating a course in linguistics,—far from it. But an occasional suggestion as to the reason for some apparent irregularity or the promise to explain the difficulty out of class or the mere fact that the teacher is not at a loss when the intelligent pupil asks a question accomplishes the elimination of bewilderment.

Students of pedagogy are agreed that the first step in keeping discipline is the thorough mastery of the subject that one is teaching. (Throughout this paper I have in mind primarily language teaching in the secondary schools, where the question of discipline plays a greater rôle than in college, though the same principles apply to both.) Certainly, then, nothing will be more conducive to good discipline than the feeling on the part of the pupil that he cannot, whenever he so wills, bring the teacher to an intellectual stop.

How may the pupil's interest in language be quickened by a teacher trained in linguistics? This may be done by a judicious use of linguistic explanations which are intrinsically interesting and which answer a justified question. An occasional attempt to widen the general linguistic horizon of the pupil is usually attended by most salutary results. For instance, a colleague of mine in a secondary school had his pupils present as an assembly exercise a brief popular story of the relationship, geographical spread, etc., of the languages taught in the school. For weeks the vivifying

influence of this exercise was noticeable in the atmosphere in our classes.

Concretely, what are some instances of questions the answers to which may profitably be suggested? I do not suggest teaching anything in this line as teaching is usually understood. It is simply the transmission of information from one intelligent being to another (the implication being important that the pupil is intelligent enough to comprehend matters of this sort) without the attendant feeling that this must be preserved for future or examination use. I shall take just a few of the questions that seem to me to be such that one may well offer a solution of the riddle that puzzles the pupil.

What teacher has not been asked the reason for the grammatical gender of German, French, and Spanish? A brief exposition of Brugmann's well-known theory of the rise of grammatical gender invariably satisfies the questioner. Even if he should not understand the explanation or if he immediately forgets it, he at least has the feeling that language is not a hit and miss affair after all. Just as in biology a pupil is more interested in the life and development of an organism than in mere dry classification of dead specimens, so the pupil feels that he is looking in on the inner workings of language when he learns such a simple fact as that the French and Spanish future is simply a combination of the infinitive plus the verb *have*.

The comparative treatment of the grammar and vocabulary of English and French and German offers one of the most propitious paths of access to the interest of the class and the broadening of its intellectual outlook. Does not the Norman invasion take on a new meaning when the pupil sees the cultural supremacy of the invaders reflected in the English vocabulary? Such words as Norman French *pork*, the palatable fine meat prepared for the table, and the lowly Anglo-Saxon *swine* tell a story of transcending interest. And how quickly some of the fossils of English grammar reveal the life that once pulsed through them when we see that *ox*, *oxen* belongs to the same class as *Ochs*, *Ochsen*, *Knabe*, *Knaben*; that *man*, *men*, *mouse*, *mice* are the results of the common phenomenon Umlaut as in *Mann*, *Männer*. Linguistically, the plural *children* may be compared to an excavated city in which the remains have been found in two strata. The ending *-r* is the same

as that of *Kind, Kinder*. When this ending had become unproductive as a sign of the plural and died and was forgotten, a further stratum, the *-n* ending was superimposed. The whole German declension loses some of its horrors if the pupil sees that his own tongue illustrates each of these classes. And above and beyond this, it makes him think. This activity will be of advantage to him whether his new insight helps him with his lesson or not. The comparative teaching of German and English grammar has been interestingly treated in an article by Professor Julius Goebel in the first yearbook of the *Pädagogische Monatshefte*.

The German strong verb will probably never be taught without reference to the English strong verb, and the battle is half won if the teacher has realized that, almost without exception, a verb is strong in German if its cognate in English is. Both Latin and French and Spanish are the gainers when the teacher suggests to such of his pupils as may have had Latin the relationship of *ille, illa, illud* and the Romance definite article. The pupil is encouraged in the direction of judicious guessing, a more or less worthy form of reasoning, if he knows that most Latin neuters become French masculines. He will now, when in doubt, make his Latin neuter a French masculine. The Latin neuter plurals in *-a* that become feminines by analogy with the feminines in *-a*, Lat. *arma*, Fr. *arme*, Lat. *folia*, Fr. *feuille*, etc. will not confuse him but, on the contrary, the interesting exception will help fix the main rule. No teacher can answer the regularly recurring question concerning the relation of Low German to the German learned in class unless he has studied the history of the language.

These few chance examples might be multiplied over and over again. No sane teacher would expect to teach linguistics in a language class. No good teacher on the other hand will neglect an opportunity of giving the work added zest by the proper suggestive use of linguistic material. Very much may be done in an individual way before and after class and by conference in answer to the express desire of the better student to get some light on the nature of the problems he is wrestling with. In individual work there is ample opportunity for satisfying the curiosity of the wide-awake student on any linguistic question that may arise. But when all is said and done, the greatest benefit accruing from the teacher's knowledge of the nature and history

of language is not so much its concrete application in individual instances in his class work as in his whole changed attitude. He is a professional man in addition to being a skilled craftsman.

When one reflects that language has two phases, outer language, the science of which is phonetics, and inner language, the science of which is psychology, the paramount importance of a knowledge of psychology for the language teacher is manifest. Fortunately very few students graduate today without an elementary acquaintance with psychology. But this is rarely coordinated with anything else or viewed in connection with an objective. However, when one brings this knowledge to bear on one's linguistic work, it is followed by the best results for both psychology and linguistics. The young teacher, who has had the good fortune of becoming familiar with the fascinating story told in Wundt's psychology of language, albeit in diluted form, will never again look upon the scientific study of language as an abstruse occupation.

An intelligent choice of method is impossible without the help of linguistic psychology. Language-learning is a habit-forming process. Need it be affirmed how essential for the teacher a thorough understanding of the formation and mechanism of established habits is? The superiority of non-voluntary over voluntary attention and the importance of securing this kind by some artifice or other; or, in the process of remembering, the importance of repetition, vividness, recency, and number of associations, for instance in language work, hearing a word, pronouncing it, writing it, and seeing it: these and many other phases of consciousness quite properly fall within the scope of the question we are considering because they belong to that knowledge about linguistic processes which we think necessary for the teacher. Most prospective teachers are pretty well satiated with method, but in how many cases have they been introduced to even the rudiments of an understanding of the nature of language itself from the psychological point of view? I do not propose a course in linguistic psychology; I do propose that if the future teacher is taking psychology at the time when he has already undertaken his preparation for language teaching, that the person in charge of the latter direct him toward a coordination of his new insight into the workings of human consciousness and his practical command of language. If, as is usually the case,



the student has had his psychological training as an underclassman, this may be reviewed chapter for chapter and its significance for linguistic problems revealed.

Where and when is the prospective teacher to acquire this training? Naturally the answer depends on many varying conditions. In some manner the senior's interest in linguistic matters should be aroused. This is usually more successfully done if his attention is first directed to general linguistics. An isolated uncoordinated course in the history of German, French, or Spanish usually falls on barren soil unless the young teacher is acquainted with the basic facts of language. Phonological and morphological changes are meaningless by themselves and have no inherent interest until they are brought into connection with larger questions. The fact that French has only one noun case form does not interest the student, but when this loss of cases is considered from the point of view of progress or decay of language, it assumes an entirely new interest. When the teacher learns that a people in the Caucasus that has no cultural pretensions possesses a half hundred case forms he sees that the number of cases is not an index of the richness of a language. The self-evident fact that German, French, and Spanish have a singular and plural appears in a new light when the teacher finds that many languages, including our American Indian, have no singular and plural in our sense.

This general introduction to the nature of language is more interesting and will bear more permanent results than the customary instruction in the phonology and morphology of an older German, French, or Spanish dialect, unless this at the same time proceeds from general basic linguistic principles. Certainly the history of a language should include, in addition to sounds and forms, such subjects as the sources of the vocabulary, the influence of foreign civilization through the influx of loan words, the efforts of purist societies to rid their language of foreign intruders, such interesting by-paths as popular etymology, etc. By all means a start should be made in introducing the teacher to the inexhaustible mine of syntax.

All of this may be attempted in the departmental courses usually offered to major students in the history of the single language or it may be accomplished by taking in addition an

introductory course in the department of general linguistics. If the young teacher has gone forth without this training, he may remedy his deficiency to a certain extent by working through such books as are suggested in the bibliography below. In the case of linguistics there is no substitute "just as good" as the genuine live teacher. The answer to the question we raised at the beginning of the paper: of what teachers may such linguistic training reasonably be expected? is simple: of all teachers who wish to become worthy members of a profession which must be founded on an adequate scientific knowledge of the material with which it operates. Until the mass of our teachers comes to view the methodology of language teaching in this light, we shall not have that concerted effort which alone can bring the standard of our profession to the plane on which we should like to see it.

The following short list of books is appended in the hope that it may be helpful to some of the readers of the JOURNAL. It is intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

E. H. Sturtevant: *Linguistic Change. An Introduction to the Historical Study of Language.* University of Chicago Press 1917. A very good popular introduction.

Otto Jespersen: *Language, its Nature, Development, and Origin.* London, Geo. Allen and Unwin 1922. Perhaps the best book in English on the subject.

Leonard Bloomfield: *An Introduction to the Study of Language.* Holt and Co. 1914.

Peter Giles: *A Short Manual of Comparative Philology for Classical Students.* 2d ed. London 1901.

K. Sandfeld-Jensen: *Die Sprachwissenschaft.* Sammlung Goeschen 1915.

E. Sapir: *Language, an Introduction to the Study of Speech.* New York 1921.

Henry Sweet: *The History of Language.* London, Dent and Co. 3d ed. 1908.

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## L'EXPLICATION FRANÇAISE

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By M. CLAVEL

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THIS article is not meant as a substitute for such standard works on the subject as those of M. M. Rudler and Roustan. It simply aims at giving—as briefly as possible—a clear and correct idea of the "explication française" to those readers of the MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL who might still belong to that misinformed class of American teachers for whom the "explication française"